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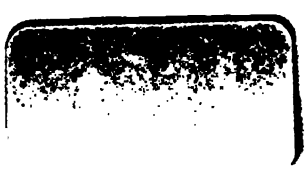

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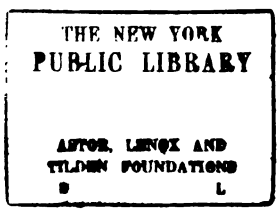
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"'GOODNESS, BUT YOU'RE SWEET!'"

(*page* 137)

Their Hearts' Desire

by

Frances Foster Perry

With Illustrations by

Harrison Fisher

And Decorations by

Theodore B. Hapgood

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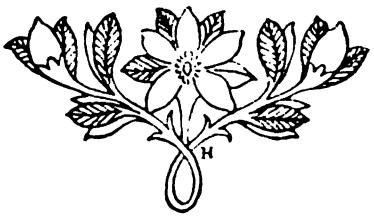

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Chapter
One

Chapter One

JOHN BELDEN'S heart was heavy. He felt as though he had swallowed something big and hard and, whatever it might be, it was growing bigger and harder every minute. His legs were tired—his feet dragged as he walked. The load was almost more than he could carry.

To the passer-by, the little figure in leather leggins, long ulster and close-fitting fez cap plodding through the snow appeared as a sleepy, unwilling pedestrian who potentially might, could, would or should be in bed. In the prosaic mind of Jane Austin, who guided his course not only in this particular instance but in most of the affairs of life, the weariness and utter lack of animal spirits was wholly due to the dissipation of the afternoon—his first party, of which she highly disapproved;

real animosity being entertained toward the chocolate candies and ice cream Santa Claus reposing in John's inner parts. Just at bed-time, too!

Now it must not be inferred Jane Austin was an ogress, not in the least; but she was fifty, and her world was very small, and sparsely settled, with few outlooks, from which she never looked, and no diversions.

It had enlarged but little in the past twenty years and at no time admitted much of even primitive ice cream and stick candy, while frivolity in a more definitely alluring guise was not presented for consideration.

Taking John, a motherless babe a month old, he had been for seven years the axis of her sphere. She circled round him unceasingly, varying little in her daily course, and never raising her eyes to see what other people thought, or what the rest of the world was doing, and so, completely absorbed in her one duty, Jane was prone to lose sight of the flight of time and the

necessary changes in the régime of a growing boy, and many regulations governing John as a toddler might still have been in force at the age of seven but for the interference of his father or Aunt Sue, who came once in a while to visit them. And no amendment to the laws of the nursery, or single departure therefrom, was ever accomplished without a vigorous remonstrance from Jane.

With this glimpse of her character, we may readily surmise that John's enjoyment of the afternoon was a special dispensation of his father's. Jane would never have been guilty of such weakness!

John Belden was seven, and, of course, his world was small, too. But, unlike Jane's, it was one of boundless possibilities, and its horizon widened daily. For with an inquiring mind of unusually quick perception and a loving, responsive nature, he saw much and felt keenly.

Each newly discovered wonder and mys-

tery of the universe appealed to him, from the marvel of the moon and stars to the coming of four teeny-weeny gray kittens to Jane's old cat; kittens that could not see at all, and that were quite too weak to walk even a part of the way.

And then John's first year of school was opening up such a lot of things to learn and do, and things not to do, that this young idea began to shoot with vigor; not only in prescribed lines, but in spots and directions unforeseen, and, for the curriculum of the school-room, undesired. And the daily companionship of children—that was rapidly developing his talent for the vicissitudes of life. His vision broadening, the whys of the world began to compass him about and with increased sensibilities came definite desire and vague longings.

John's love for Jane was part of his life, a habit of his existence. As she had served him from the first, so long had he loved her, and her affection, always finding ex-

pression in established, unvarying lines, developed an element of loyalty in him far in excess of any other feeling. And so while he found the faithful loving hand of a mother, he sought in vain for the sympathetic understanding of the maternal heart.

He went to her with his bumps and bruises; he was sure of succor. He knew almost with certainty just what remedy would be applied for each particular kind of wound. He even knew where they, the remedies, were kept. He was conscious, too, that Jane was ever ready to give him anything he wished for that was right for him to have, but his griefs and disappointments, and most cherished dreams, often the fanciful expression of the real needs of a child, he confided to Adam, and Adam was a dog.

It was almost six o'clock this December night; Jo Strong's birthday, and three days till Christmas.

John had hailed this latter fact with glee

earlier in the day, but now emerging from the light and warmth of Jo's home into the darkness and cold, somehow everything seemed behind him but bed—and that doesn't count with a boy. Consequently, his mind reverted to the events of the afternoon for comfort, but with poor success, for the very things he recalled with greatest pleasure only served to increase his present gloom.

Three hours before, he and Jane had passed over the same ground on the way to the party. Then the sun was shining in the world, and in John's heart, and before him lay the object of many days' joyful anticipation. Even Jane's worst forebodings had paled a little under his enthusiasm.

Arriving at the Strongs' house, she had taken him up to remove his wraps and then down-stairs, where she left him scoured within an inch of his life; his hair brushed to stringent smoothness, every line of his attire and character properly adjusted.

He found everything quite equal to his expectations, in some regards quite exceeding them, since the beautiful and artistic had not figured in his speculations. And there were many of the boys and girls he knew at school and while they, like himself, were at first in the semi-hypnotic state induced by parting injunctions and the fear of wrecking the family honor should any one of these by chance be forgotten, a rollicking game of "Blind Man's Buff" had awakened all dormant sensibilities and put to rout abnormal moral conditions.

It was as Blind Man that he first saw Her, and that was really the beginning of things.

Now John loved the beautiful in everything, and *She* was beautiful—beautiful as the Princess in a fairy tale, in her white gown; and her soft brown hair, radiant smile and the dimple in her chin fascinated him; while the scarlet bandage covering her

eyes supplied just the little mystic air that makes a fairy Princess irresistible.

Hence John's capitulation was complete. He stood transfixed, forgetting the children and what the scarlet bandage really meant. The idea of avoiding the outstretched searching hands of the "Blind Man" did not occur to him. So he was caught, of course, and stood a happy captive, little quivers running up and down his spine and the back of his legs, as soft hands glided over face and head on down to his shoulders, farther, even to his hands, in search of some identifying point.

Game followed game, and She was the life of them all, only pausing to tie hair ribbons, shoe strings and sashes, some of which he had untied; put safety pins in place of missing buttons, and administer comfort to the bumped and bruised, and loving justice to the quarrelsome; and finally, at table adjusting napkins comfortably and filling plates with a fine regard for

correct proportions and a glorious disregard for consequences. And John, in an exposed position, midway the festive board, with an expanse of temptation on either side, gave Jane one fleeting thought and abandoned himself to the delights of forbidden things and a chivalrous effort to verify Her generous judgment of his accomplishments.

He tried to be near Her in the games, but she was ever flitting from place to place, and there were other admirers, perhaps a trifle less ardent, but often in the way. And so, despite persistent effort and some subterfuge, John had not been wholly satisfied with his lot.

Once, near the close of the afternoon, he spied her sitting alone in a corner and promptly sidled over and took a stand by her chair. She turned and smiled at him, and he smiled back, waiting for further developments.

She asked his name, and he told her, and

then her hand closed upon one of his resting on the arm of the chair.

"How old are you, John?" she questioned.

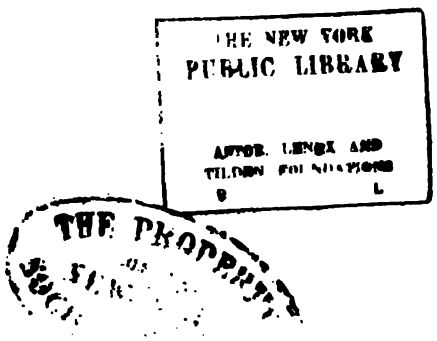
"Seven. The boys say I am little, but," with rising spirit, "I'll bet I'll grow to be a big man like my father—'cause he was little, too, until he got on trousers—and then he grew a lot! Aunt Sue says *all* our 'fambly' grow a lot when they get on trousers."

"Oh! I am sure you will, too," giving his hand a squeeze.

There was a lull—the subject seemed exhausted, and she absorbed in other things—John felt the necessity of providing something new for consideration. With sudden impulse, he drew a small memorandum book from his pocket and opened it.

"This is my age book. I always carry it," he explained. "I'll put you down, if you want me to. See," leaning confidingly against her, and turning the leaves slowly.

"'THIS IS MY AGE BOOK. I ALWAYS CARRY IT,' HE EXPLAINED"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"There's Jane's—fifty,—fifty-two, that's for Cook; Daddy's—thirty-eight; and seven, that's for me." At the next page he hesitated. On it, in irregular but unmistakable figures was one hundred. "Jesus is a hundred," he finally announced, "and a thousand," turning another leaf, "that's for God. He's the oldest person I know. I haven't got Aunt Sue," he added regretfully, as he closed the book and stood thoughtfully tracing with his fore-finger the gold lettering of the advertising Insurance Company on the cover.

A silence John did not understand but which he felt to be most comfortable ensued, and then "Who is Aunt Sue?" she asked gently.

He slipped the book into his pocket and faced her, his face glowing with enthusiasm.

"Oh, she's my aunt—— She lives in the country in an awful nice place—a big yard—with trees in it 'at you can climb if

Nurse is busy—and beautifullest roses—and a barn—and a plain hired man. Gee!" with an emphasizing shake of his head, "I like him,—and snakes, just little ones," reassuringly, seeing that she did not enthuse. "I wouldn't let them bite you—and great big 'high-ball' bushes. I mean," with an emphasizing nod, "I mean snow-ball bushes. My daddy planted them when he lived there a long time ago." This with much pride.

She regarded him with suppressed amusement for a moment, then laughed softly to herself and John laughed too, without in the least knowing why.

"I love the country, too," she told him presently, "the flowers and grass, and I like to climb"—but here an array of hair ribbons were presented for attention, and John was unceremoniously pushed aside.

He stood apart marvelling. To think of it! She could climb. She wasn't afraid, and liked it, too. That was the finishing

touch, only, he did wish he knew what it was she liked to climb. He feared it was a common cross-barred fence but he hoped, oh, *how* he hoped it was a tree!

Longing for a chance to continue the conversation, he waited near, but as soon as the ribbons were tied, William Gordon's mother came in, followed very shortly by other mothers, so her attention was quite taken up with grown folks, while the grown folks' respective offspring went up-stairs to don hats and coats.

John wished there was some one to come and claim him right before them all—of course he knew Jane would be waiting up-stairs—but some one in soft furs and a feathery hat. Jane never wore furs, and her hats were always stiff and depressingly even all round. No one else would come for him, of course, and there was no use waiting about, so he went with his host to make a final raid on the dining table for candy.

On his return he found that almost everybody had gone. He looked around for Mrs. Strong. He had not thought of her before, but now wondered where she had been all afternoon. He wished to bid her good-night, as instructed by Jane; a vague idea of having strayed from the straight and narrow path on divers occasions, firing his passion for implicit obedience as a finish.

Learning from Jo that his mother was upstairs, he followed the example of the other guests and advanced to pay his respects to Her, offering a limp, perfunctory hand.

She took it and smiled down upon him. "Good-night," she said.

John said nothing. It all seemed so meaningless, so inadequate. It was not at all the way he wished to say good-night. He raised hungry expectant eyes to her face.

"I hope you have had a happy time," she

added in response, laying her arm about his shoulders.

"Oh, a dandy time!" encouraged by her tone, and he would have asked her more about the climbing, but again some one interposed, and he disconsolately withdrew.

In the hall he met a little girl in white with accompaniments of blue, whose sash he had surreptitiously untied during the afternoon's frolic, and whose indignant glance had rested upon him more than once, but now, with the delicious inconsistency of her sex, she smiled and slipped her hand in his.

"I don't want to go home, do you?" she said, as they reached the foot of the stairs.

"No, I don't," said John.

They went up several steps in silence and mutual discontent. Then she stopped and turned to share with him her crumb of comfort. "Do you want to come to *my* party?"

John balanced himself on one foot, and

looked at her in pleased surprise. Her name was Emily. Emily—what, he did not know, or where she lived.

"Yes, I'll come," he answered, advancing to the step above. "When is it going to be?"

She grasped his hand with both of hers and hopped up beside him. "I'll ask my mother if I can have you," she announced cordially as she landed.

"Oh!" said John.

They had reached the first landing.

"Can't you come a wee bit faster?" unexpectedly a voice urged from above. Looking up, John saw Jane, and the little girl saw her, too, and after an instant's curious regard leaned toward him, covering her mouth with one small hand. "Is that *your* mother?" she whispered.

John looked again at the waiting figure above and then at his companion. Instinctively he dropped her hand and backed away against the balustrade while he hesi-

tated. Somehow the question disturbed him. He shrank from it and her, for the note of surprise and curiosity in the accented word had not escaped him; he felt it differentiated himself as well as Jane in some indefinable way.

"No, she's just—a good friend of mine," he faltered and hurrying on ahead followed Jane into the bedroom for his wraps.

"Why, you're the very last to come up, John," she commented, stooping to adjust his leggings. "Have you had a good time?"

"Awful good." The answer carried conviction without enthusiasm. Jane thought it quite too brief to be natural, considering the subject. On the look-out for symptoms, she instantly attributed it to satiety in a malignant form.

"What *did* you have for supper?" in a despondent voice.

John told her in detail, omitting nothing.

"But you," anxiously, "what did *you* eat, John?"

"Everything."

Jane uttered not a syllable, but got her charge into his wraps as quickly as possible, which was not very quick, since he seemed disinclined to help himself.

But at last, the task accomplished, he followed her through the upper hall and down the stairs. The house appeared quite deserted. They saw no one, and perfect silence reigned, except for the faint sound of retreating voices and low laughter; and then somewhere a door closed—closed softly, gently, but still, it closed, increasing the air of finality that oppressed him.

At the foot of the stairs, he lingered an instant; his eyes bent dreamily upon the floor strewn with bright bits of paper, holly berries and forgotten or discarded favors. Close to his feet lay a bow of pale blue ribbon. It recalled Emily—and other things. Picking it up, he reached to lay

it on the newel-post, shattering, as he did so, a full blown American Beauty rose from the vase above.

Just then the center lights went out. Impulsively he turned and hastened after Jane, but before the library door again he paused, for She sat within, leaning wearily back in a big cushioned chair, one hand falling listlessly over the arm, while the other, holding a bunch of little purple flowers, lay in her lap. Though she smiled, her eyes were closed—perhaps she was a sleeping Princess, and this a forsaken palace.

Away off, as far as he could think, John heard the closing of another door. He held his breath. *Now* she was quite alone. If only he might stay!

His pulses quickened, he drew a step nearer, and then—Jane took him gently but firmly by the hand and led him out into the night.

For months John Belden had been haunted by a vague longing which had

never taken more distinct form than a recurrent wish that Jane was different. He did not know why, for Jane he knew was good. He felt almost sure she had never done anything wrong in her life. He almost wished she had. But this longing, the companionship and experience of the afternoon had developed, and the satisfying personality of his new friend, the presence of so many beautiful mothers, and the little girl's questions on the stairs, had all tended to clear his mental atmosphere of doubts and perplexity, so that by the time he reached the street, a perfect realization of what he most wanted in the whole world absorbed him, and he felt dreadfully alone.

He could not think of another boy or girl, not one, who did not have a real live mother.

There was a beautiful picture of some one on the library wall at home—a mother that they said was his, only—well, once or twice when alone with Adam, he had called her

softly to see if anything would happen, and she had not even answered. Perhaps she did not know him, she went away so long ago, and was never coming back, why, no one seemed to know, not even Daddy, and Daddy had told him a lot about her too, how sweet and good she was, about her eyes and mouth and hair, even about her hands "so beautiful and tender." John always remembered those words, "beautiful and tender"—her hands, and he wished that he could see them in the picture.

But to-night a wild desire consumed all other thought, leaving a single avenue his mind could take, and his whole body ached in contemplation, for it seemed to reach so many, many miles ahead and had no turning point or end.

Suddenly the chimes of a neighboring church burst forth clear and vibrating on the winter air—"Joy to the World" they sang.

John took a long, deep breath. Something gave way and made it possible. He looked up, his heart responding instantly to the song of cheer. To the belfry from which the song of glory came, on up to the stars above, he raised his eyes, and he saw things that grown folks do not see, and heard melodies too remote for them to hear, because of the manifold things of earth that lie between.

An interval of silence while a closing note diffused itself.

Again "Joy to the World" the chimes began, and then, across the soft white stillness of the night, nearer and nearer, came the sound of other bells. They, too, sang of joy, but in gayer, faster measure, a riotous song, that finding echo in his childish heart, warmed and thrilled him.

He had forgotten, but now—through the darkness of night and the gloom of his own forebodings he looked straight into the merry, reassuring face of Santa Claus.

A little excited laugh escaped his parted lips. His mind fairly galloped to happy conclusions without reason or guidance, only—since he could remember, Santa Claus had never failed him or any other boy he knew.

He broke from Jane's restraining hand. Hopping, skipping, jumping, he circled around her; till finally, running on ahead, he waited under the flickering light of a street lamp, exclaiming with enthusiasm as she joined him: "Jane, tell me, does Santa Claus make live things? I mean ponies, and dogs and—things that walk and talk, like he brings boys sometimes?"

"No, John, only God can do that," Jane answered in a mildly reproachful tone. (She must review his catechism on Sunday!)

"Well, where does he get them, then?" John urged, unconscious of his fall from grace. "He brought Cousin Dick a dandy goat last year, and Aunt Sue a baby!"

"Perhaps he *bought* the goat."

"Perhaps," dubiously, "but the baby—*where* did he get the baby?"

"I can't say—exactly. I don't know much about Santa Claus, John." Truthful Jane! She never cultivated, never approved of fictitious characters.

They walked in silence a little way, and then John announced with conviction, "I'll bet God helps him. He's a regular 'corker,' God is."

"John Belden!" Jane gasped in horror, for she did not catch the note of praise in the boyish vernacular.

"Well, He *is*, Jane. He can just do anything He wants. S'pose you think babies is all He can make. Humph!" in a scornful voice. "He makes men and—ladies and—and giants, too, sometimes." The last triumphantly.

Jane said nothing. She was occupied trying to account for the remarkable change in the deportment of her small charge.

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"'JANE, TELL ME, DOES SANTA CLAUS MAKE LIVE THINGS?'"

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Could this sudden animation betoken delirium?

She looked at him solicitously. He was gazing meditatively up at the sky.

"I know now, Jane. Santa Claus gets them in another world," he said at length, with a shade of awe and wonder in his voice.

"Where did you learn that nonsense?"

"Daddy said so, he told me. It's Mars—one star. It's a world—away off, a hundred and a thousand miles—farther than from here to Aunt Sue's. Anyway, they *think* it's a world, Jane," reluctantly admitting the possibility of a doubt, "and I just know that's where he gets things. I'll bet you anything," kicking viciously at a pile of snow. "Gee! I wonder how he gets there!" he added, again thoughtful.

"I'm sure I don't know," she answered abstractedly, while she studied him.

Jane did not easily give up her opinions, but John's step once more buoyant, his voice animated, normal conditions existing, it cer-

tainly looked as though at least a part of the ice cream Santa Claus had digested. But all danger was not yet passed, and so when he begged to stay up late and wait for his "Dad," a daring request, she chose what seemed the lesser of two evils, and said "Yes."

Chapter
Two

Chapter Two

ENTERING the house, they had hardly closed the door till Adam was in the hall, careering around with the grace of a small elephant, his antics seriously interfering with John's efforts to remove his wraps. But this accomplished, the boy ran down the hall, closely pursued by the Great Dane into the library, where they settled themselves on the rug in front of the fire, and Adam ate the chocolates concealed for him in the fullness of his young master's blouse. The fact that candy was not considered good for Adam either, had always been a close tie between them!

The chocolates disposed of, Adam opened the conversation, pounding his tail vigorously upon the floor, but John did not respond. He lay with his head propped on his hands, looking dreamily at the blazing

logs. Once more Adam expressed himself with added vehemence, but still his presence was ignored.

This was too much—something must be wrong.

Adam blinked thoughtfully, then slowly rising to his feet, walked around between John and the fire, and poked his cold, wet nose into John's warm neck. That was Adam's favorite spot!

John squirmed and giggled as he pulled the big dog down close beside him, and whispering, told him all about it. And that was what Adam wanted. He was a fine listener, offering not a single suggestion, only expressing his interest and appreciation by a hearty dab of his large red tongue on John's small nose.

Then they both lay in silence gazing at the fire. The boy, with wide-open, soulful eyes, transported by his fancies to a state of perfect bliss, while the dog, soon dozing off, found himself confronted by a host of

cats—awful, diabolical looking cats, with shiny, smooth chocolate bodies and extravagantly large and bristling white tails held uniformly aloft, each separate hair manifesting individual hostility. The hair on the scruff of Adam's neck rose bravely. He uttered a sharp bark of warning, but it ended in a tremulous whine of despair, as he observed the rapid advance of the undaunted foe. On the eve of ignominious flight, he heaved a prodigious sigh of relief and satisfaction when suddenly aroused to a consciousness of peace and safety. To think he had escaped, and with his honor unimpaired!

He raised himself to his haunches, meditating. He wondered where that particular breed of felines came from and what his chances were for meeting them again, when in the midst of his speculations, some one suddenly grabbed John by the feet, exclaiming in a big voice: "Well, Buster, what are you doing here at this hour? Is Nurse sick

that you are allowed to sit up?" And then began the romp that usually followed a meeting of father and son.

But to-night, no romping for John. He wriggled and writhed, calling out, "Wait, Daddy—don't. I want to tell you—please," as he made repeated efforts to get upon his feet.

At last the timely entrance of Adam into the fray diverted his tormentor's attention long enough for John to announce with enthusiasm, "Daddy,—please, I want to write a letter now, so it will be in time—to Santa Claus—that's why I stayed up—and I want you to help me to spell it quick—for I'll have to go to bed in just a minute."

The tone of anxiety and excitement plainly showed that the business was important, so pencil and paper were promptly supplied, and John went to work.

His father stood by, watching with interest the flushed face and rigid little fist wielding the pencil. He was curious, too,

but he did not question—did not even speak, except in response to a plea for help, though the words he was asked to spell were of so varied a nature as to give no clue to the particular contents of the letter.

Not until it was sealed, addressed, and stamped did John relax his efforts, for he was momentarily expecting Jane's call to bed, and had only just put the letter in his father's hand, when she summoned him.

"Don't forget to send it to-night, will you, Daddy?" he cautioned brightly, raising his face to be kissed, and then he scampered off, Adam following him to the door.

Robert Belden sat down and stretched his limbs to the warmth of the crackling fire. It felt good. The night was cold and he had had a long drive. The fire was a real comfort. He leaned his head against the back of his easy chair, and smilingly contemplated the envelope in his hand. Adam came and stood sedately beside him.

"Adam," in a puzzled tone, "what do

you suppose is in this epistle, anyway?" Adam did not commit himself, but to show his interest laid one paw upon his master's knee. "Let me see," Dr. Belden continued, "I spelled things—live—lady—climb—chin and Mars. Well, if that isn't a mix-up," with an amused chuckle. "Sort of a Chinese puzzle, and I hate to give up and look at the answer."

He delayed a moment longer, and then raising himself to a more erect position, took a paper knife from the table close at hand and cut the envelope open. "It is very mysterious, and very important," he said, with playful solemnity, opening out the sheet.

"Dear Santa," it began—

"I do not want the things I said. I only want a mother—a live one that can do things, like the lady at Jo's that can climb with a hole in her chin. Maybe you can get one in Mars.

"JOHN BELDEN."

The father sank slowly back in his chair. The hand holding the letter dropped to his knee. He was dazed, stupefied by this unheard of request; what he felt to be a crying need in the life of his boy.

He had expected the natural demands of childhood; extravagant, perhaps, but demands that with money he could meet, or with tact modify, but what in all the world could satisfy this heart hunger—the God-given instinct of a child for mother-love!

An awful sense of futility and incompetency to comprehend the situation oppressed him, since he had failed all these years in the very thing he cared most about—John's happiness and welfare. And Jane Austin, the Infallible, with all her years of experience and singleness of purpose and love for John, she must have failed too.

This added to his distress, for from the first, recognizing a man's limitations, he had relied on her care and companionship to supplement his own.

And now the letter was all he had to enlighten him. Recalling but vaguely its contents, except the one paramount fact, he turned to it again.

"I do not want the things I said," he read, and stopped. This complete giving up of all coveted treasures showed how much in earnest the boy was. "I only want a mother," he continued, "a live one—like the lady at Jo's—that can climb—with a hole in her chin." He paused, smiling tenderly at the ambiguity. And then Robert Belden caught his breath. Suddenly something dawned upon him that almost stopped the beating of his heart, and enveloped his mental faculties in a sort of haze.

"The lady at Jo's," he remarked slowly, shifting his position. Was he dreaming, or deluded? He must think—but his whole consciousness became suddenly dominated by an inspired conviction not to be reasoned with or questioned. It seemed the very impulse of his being.

He sprang from his chair, and began pacing the floor, head up, eyes glowing with exaltation. Dreaming, or deluded? No—no—it was Fate and Barbara. A half hysterical laugh escaped him. It was meant to be, he knew it! John wanted her, or one like her, and there was only one Barbara McClellan in all the world. And he? O God! how he wanted her! A thousand times more beautiful she seemed, and holy, a blessing set apart for him and John.

He had thought to make her love him, but somehow now he knew the miracle was wrought, for his spirit drew hers gently to him, not a shadow intervened, and he softly folded his love about her while she smiled a beautiful radiance into the room. He heard the echo of his love within her heart, and felt the beauty of her soul within his own.

Softly the voice of his dear old mother came to him, singing in quavering tones as she used to sing so long ago, "God moves

in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." She had believed it—bless her, through joy and pain—to the very end. And he believed it now—and Barbara? Yes, Barbara, too. He smiled in happy confidence. He did not really need to ask her, for he knew.

Resuming his chair before the fire, he gave himself up to the joys of retrospection.

The revelation seemed complete, and in its light all his relations with her assumed a new significance, beginning with the day six months before when she came to the home of his friend, Henry Strong.

Calling professionally a few hours after her arrival, he had surprised her sitting on the nursery floor, absorbed in the building of a stately castle for his convalescing patient.

There had been no one to introduce them, but he quickly identified her in his mind with the expected guest, and young Elizabeth Strong, radiant with the after-glow of

chicken pox and the assurance of a four year old, recommended them to each other without reserve. And the acquaintance, so auspiciously begun, flourished like a green bay tree, its spicy fruit a source of joy to him at least, while subtly nourishing a sentiment of which he did not know himself possessed.

Barbara McClellan had come to his friend's immediately after the death of her father, sad and desperately lonely, for she was an only child and had lost her mother years before.

Naturally, in the newness of her grief, she shrank from contact with the world in general, going out little, except for walks and drives, and meeting few people, finding comfort and happiness in the immediate interests of her friends and their children, in whose life she unreservedly merged her own.

And he, exceptionally privileged, as an old friend and family physician, to come

and go at will, morning, noon or night, had participated, long before she came, in the intimate life of the household; a circumstance affording him from the first her almost daily consideration, and occasioning attentions on his part sincere but not in the least considered. Even the habit of sending her violets, inaugurated by the observance of her birthday in the early fall, had seemed only a concurrence in the increased requirements of an enlarged family.

He smiled blandly at the thought, but he knew that had he been questioned, even a month ago, as to the frequency of his visits he would have answered in all honesty that the Strongs were his dearest friends, that he had always gone there informally and often, and that there was nothing he enjoyed more than an evening in the rectory. *She* would have been included in the evening, of course, but not as a distinct factor. And how confounded he had been to discover the real state of affairs!

Then he recalled the evening of his first enlightenment.

He had dropped in on his way home from the hospital and found her alone, engaged in the dressing of a large, blond doll. Unannounced, as usual, he enjoyed a moment's contemplation of her from the sitting-room door before she knew that he was there.

He could close his eyes and see her now as she sat in the warm glow of the lamp, her black gown relieved by a tiny line of white about the throat and wrists, her lap strewn with bright-colored pieces; a sewing-basket was on the table close at hand, but closer still, he remembered with a thrill of satisfaction, the violets he had sent that day. The doll she held aloft before her, bending its extremities into conventional lines of ease and grace, while she viewed its embryo magnificence with a satisfied smile.

The sound of his voice had startled her. He recalled with some contrition the little gasping cry she gave, and the look of alarm

in the eyes that questioningly sought the door—a look which speedily gave place to one of relief and evident pleasure.

But she was very sorry to tell him—which she did immediately—that both Mr. and Mrs. Strong were out, seeming to feel he might not care to stay.

He had been quick to reassure her; he remembered exactly the very words he used: "I am glad. I would rather have you all to myself for a whole evening than anything I know."

He laughed now at the frank committal. It was true! He made the statement naturally, without a thought beyond, and but for her momentary self-consciousness, evinced by the delicate pink that stole into her cheeks and the sudden half veiling of her eyes, he might not have realized the significance of his own words.

As it was, the knowledge surprised and disconcerted him, a circumstance that now afforded him intense amusement. He felt

as though he had played a joke upon another man, a poor, unsophisticated country bumpkin!

How admirably she had regained her self-possession, he reflected, and assisted him to his, and her blush—he recalled it now with a delicious sense of possible power, while he wondered just how much it meant and what the drooping eyelids hid.

Most of the evening she sewed diligently, while they talked and he smoked, with her kind permission, and played his very limited repertoire on the piano. Then she suggested a short story in a magazine, which he read aloud. Afterwards, while he enjoyed his pipe once more, they talked of many things, frequently lapsing, however, into long silences, during which he enveloped himself in a cloud of smoke and an air of preoccupation, while covertly watching her from the corner of his eye and striving to diagnose his case.

She had seemed doubly industrious at

these times, he remembered. He also remembered, with an indulgent smile, that he was invariably requested to find her mislaid scissors, or to pursue an errant spool which persisted in dropping from her lap and rolling away to some remote corner of the room.

This had finally ended in his offering to hold in his own hand both scissors and spool when not in use. She demurred a little, it was "such a foolish occupation for a man," but his argument that it was an improvement on scrambling around on all fours over-ruled.

Once, near the close of the evening, she had come to momentary grief, and he valiantly to the rescue. Her needle slipped down deep beneath the nail of one deft finger. She exclaimed a little, and so, without being formally called, he took the case, and the injured hand, in his.

The needle intact had been readily removed, but to thoroughly satisfy himself—

he failed to state in what way—it had been necessary to make a prolonged and exhaustive search for the point.

During the examination of the finger, and—himself, she had watched him with a serious, trustful look that aggravated to an alarming degree all his symptoms and convinced him that his case was hopeless.

During the fortnight since that memorable evening they had been often together, each time serving to strengthen his resolve to win her, and his uncertainty as to whether it were possible, and if so, how and when.

There being no question as to his own state of mind and heart, he spent his time speculating as to hers and debating the wisdom of a final move.

But he did not find it easy to get his bearings with Barbara McClellan. Her nature was a rare combination of reserve and amazing simplicity. And while oftentimes ingenuousness opened up entrancing vistas that transported him to the very seventh

heaven of bliss, they were quickly and quite breathlessly obscured by an instant reserve, much as a mother hastens to cover the revelations of a too precocious child. So these charming glimpses only served to keep him ever traversing the hillsides of doubt.

Now from his newly established eminence, he viewed as of another being the footsteps of his vacillating feet; steps that crossed and re-crossed, discerning where he might have advanced with safety many times. But, strange to say, the path by which he attained his present dizzy height he could not see.

He was there, that was enough, and before him lay the country of his heart's desire, waiting, ready for immediate possession, if only Barbara were ready too.

He must know. He would go to her at once—and he started toward the door, pausing midway to consult his watch when Jane entered with a cup of tea.

"I thought perhaps you would like some-

thing hot before you go out again, sir," she said. "It will be so late before you have dinner, and it's cold."

"Thank you, Jane, you are very thoughtful," he said perfunctorily.

She put the tray on the table and left the room; whereupon Dr. Belden eyed it with antagonism, while his spirits sank. For Jane's words brought to mind an engagement to dine at the Club with sundry others of the local profession, entertaining an eminent surgeon from abroad, and he had been delegated to make the address of welcome.

"Heavens! A fine one it would be," he reflected sardonically. He hadn't an idea in his head, but Barbara, and "God moves in a mysterious way."

He leaned against the edge of the table, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, and scowled as he faced the situation. One thing was sure, he was not to be depended upon. What man would be! And looking down at the hundred and eighty pounds of

deferred hope in English tweeds, of which he was miserably conscious, he indulged in one large, audible "Damn!" and inaudibly consigned the eminent surgeon to the bottom of the sea, with all the isolated corporeal members which had engaged his attention, and of which, incidentally, this dinner was a consequence.

Then once more Robert Belden looked at his watch and debated. He must do something. The pressure was too great. It could not all be put off. He closed his watch with a decisive snap and went to the 'phone.

"Seven hundred, please," he requested, followed by the customary wait. "Hello, that you, Henry? This is Belden talking . . . Yes . . . No, not to-night, thanks. Am due at the Club at eight, and I haven't any time to waste on you, old man. I want to talk to Miss McClellan, if I may. . . . All right, I'll wait." Silence for a time, and then, "Good-evening," and a beaming

smile. "How are you all after the party? . . . Oh, is she? I'm sorry to hear that. . . . Yes, I want to know if I may see you for a few minutes to-morrow morning, as early as nine-thirty. . . . Not early?" laughing. "Well, I can make it six-thirty, or seven, only I don't want to get mixed up with Louise's butcher and baker. . . . Beg pardon? . . . Thanks, you flatter me. Well, we'll make it nine-thirty, then. . . . Very well. Good-night."

The 'phone was abandoned with the air of having accomplished all manner of things. At least, she knew that he was coming.

Stopping to take John's letter from the table, his glance fell again upon the offending cup of tea, Jane's contribution to his comfort. Good, pious, temperate Jane! Somehow he felt sorry for Jane to-night, and it was a very little thing to drink a cup of tea!

He raised it to his lips. It was cold. He made a wry face and shrugged his shoulders, then looked benignly, in glad relief, upon the palm in the bay window, and crossing over, poured the liquid Oolong and Gunpowder about its roots. It was a sturdy plant and likely to survive the dissipation, he decided. Besides, according to Jane, tea was good for anything.

"You make excellent tea, Jane," he commented, replacing the cup upon the table as she re-entered the room. "And it *is* a cold night. Be careful about the ventilation in John's room, won't you?" he added.

"I always am. You know he hasn't had a cold this year," she answered with pride.

"I know," nodding approval. Then, "How are you two getting on these days?"

"Very well, sir, but of course John doesn't think of anything but Christmas now, and what he wants, and to-night he has some queer notion about Mars—says you told him. When he was getting ready for

bed he talked of nothing else. Have you gotten his Christmas things yet, sir?"

"No, not yet,—not—all of them. But—well, I've picked them out," he added brightly. "By the way, Jane," in a different tone, "What is the condition of the guest room next to John's? You needn't speak of it at present," he went on, not waiting for her to answer, "but we may have a guest for Christmas, and I would like to have the room cleaned and made as attractive as possible, fresh curtains and so on. Perhaps, on second thought, I had better look it over with you in the morning."

"Very well, sir. Will the gentleman be here long?" she asked, taking the tray from the table.

"The gentleman?" in a puzzled voice. And then recovering himself, "Ah—yes—yes. I—didn't understand. Yes, indefinitely, if he comes."

Jane wondered as she left the room why he flushed and smiled so entirely. She

couldn't see the slightest cause for either. Then she wondered what the gentleman was like.

As for Robert Belden, he stood spell-bound by his own audacity. "Curtains—not only curtains, but *fresh* curtains!" And he had not even told her that he loved her.

A tender humorousness crept into his face, as he ran the fingers of one hand through his hair. Was he more thirty-eight or eighteen, he wondered. Truly, the latter, since his maturer senses, treed for the time by the reckless maneuvers of his boy soul, sat complacently idle, smiling down into the recognized face of Destiny standing guard beneath.

Adam came up and licked his master's hand. Fortunately he did not know how much of him was up a tree, or he would more than likely have barked, for Adam almost always barked at things in trees.

Dr. Belden rested his hand on the dog's head. "Adam, it's too bad you're just a

dog," he said. "You've got a soul. Yes, I understand, you needn't wag your tail so. There, old dog," leaning over to pat him affectionately, "you go lie down in front of the fire and make up your mind what you want for Christmas dinner, and by Jove, I'll get it, Adam, even if it's squabs at a dollar per."

And then Adam's master went upstairs, took a cold tub, something besides cold tea, and dressed, all to the tune of "God moves in a mysterious way," in measures ranging from soulful long meter to the most frenzied rag-time, after which he went to the Club and tried to behave like other men.

Chapter
Three

Chapter Three

IN his perusal of the Journal at the breakfast table the next morning, Robert Belden was relieved to find there had been no lapse on his part the evening before sufficiently marked as to supply material for the reporter. In fact, his brief address received flattering comment.

"It's wonderful what a man can do, when he's pushed to it," he remarked, dropping two lumps instead of one into his coffee. And John said, "Pushed to what, Daddy?" His father said, "Have another egg, son. And, by the way, I got your letter off last night, and it ought to reach headquarters about half-past nine this morning."

"Headquarters?" said John. "Is *that* where Santa Claus lives?"

"Not exactly, but—it's where—the late, special orders like yours are filled."

"Oh!" John exclaimed, his mouth full of toast and his eyes big with interest.

He ate his second egg in silence. Then resting his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand, "Daddy," he began, "do you know anybody that came from Mars?"

"From Mars? H'm'm. No, I don't believe I do, John."

"Well, do you know any one who ever went to Mars, Daddy?" with a suggestion of anxiety.

"No. You see, the trains don't run, and air-ships aren't much good yet. Guess we'll have to wait awhile for a trip of that kind, son. Why, do you want to go?"

The man smiled, but the boy didn't. The corners of his mouth drooped a little.

"No," he said in a wistful tone. "But Jane said that it wasn't true, that it was all a joke about Mars being a world, that it is just a star and that you were fooling me. And I said I believed *you*. You weren't

fooling me, were you, Daddy? " he went on breathlessly, as though fearing the answer. " You know lots more than Jane, of course, 'bout such things, and I told her I bet Santa Claus and God can go there, anyway, if other folks can't."

" Of course. There's not a doubt of it," his father agreed.

" That's what I say," resumed John, his voice ascending a scale of cheerfulness. " If Santa Claus can drive right through the air, and if God can jump around the way He does, hearing kids say their prayers, I'll bet they can go to Mars just as easy—as easy,"—casting his eyes about for an object for comparison—" as I can shake a salt cellar," he finished convincingly.

By this time John's countenance was radiant. He leaned over and whispered, though they were quite alone, " Daddy, will you do something for me? "

" I most certainly will. What is it, Buster? "

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Their Hearts' Desire

John slid from his chair, napkin in hand, and came near to explain.

"Well, I don't know, of course, Daddy —nobody ever really knows about Santa Claus—but I think maybe—maybe—he'll bring me something—oh,—something he can't bring down a chimney."

"What!" with astonishment. "Can't bring down a chimney?"

John nodded, his eyes full of mystery.

"What on earth do you think it's going to be?"

"I don't know 'ezactly.' Something awful big, or something alive, and I want to leave a door or window open so he can get in. Please, Daddy."

His father pretended to consider seriously.

"I'm afraid Jane will never allow any more animals in the house," he said at length in a dubious tone. "But"—with sudden courage—"we'll just not tell her, and I'll promise to fix it so Santa Claus can come

right in the front door. There, does that satisfy you, young man?" giving him a squeeze.

"Oh, yes," came from John, in a smothered but delighted voice.

"Well, run off, then, to Jane. Keep mum, and let her wipe the egg off your right cheek. I must be off."

Two minutes ahead of scheduled time, John's letter reached "headquarters." The maid admitted the bearer, and he met Mrs. Strong in the hall as she came from the rear of the house, enveloped in a shining white apron, carpet sweeper and dust cloth in hand.

"What do you mean by invading a house at this hour of the day?" she demanded, bestowing a beaming smile and a hand in welcome. "We don't any of us need pills or poultices."

"You must know about the ounce of prevention and the pound of cure, don't you?" reminded Dr. Belden. "Well, I thought

I'd drop in as the ounce, and save you a big doctor's bill. You have a terribly busy air," he remarked, taking off his coat. "Thought you were a sick lady yesterday."

"No, that's a mistake. I wasn't. Come into the library," she commanded, leading the way, "and I'll tell you all about it."

A big log burned briskly in the fireplace. He took a stand before it, his hands behind him.

"I was not sick," Mrs. Strong began, "just one of my old headaches, and Henry and Barbara got their heads together and decided to put me to bed. You know Jo had a party? Well, Barbara, with my husband's consent, ran it all. At noon I not only had a headache all by myself upstairs, but was threatened with convulsions, thinking of the things to be done by three o'clock, when lo! the usurper appears with a cup of tea, a serene smile, and the information that everything is in readiness, that the children have been scoured and in due season will

don their festive garb, and that if I don't prove more docile and relax I shall be banished to a cot in the attic." She finished with a dramatic swirl of the dust cloth.

"Quite right. Good for the usurper!" and he laughed at the victim's indignation. "But really, Louise, they have not been as bad of late, have they?" regarding her solicitously. "I hoped those——"

"You mean Henry and Barbara? Worse!"

"No. The headaches. Be serious a moment. You should not have so many."

"I quite agree with you, Dr. Belden. But tell me," with a change of tone, "how is your small family?"

"Well, let me see. Jane is well, she always is; and likewise James; and John survived the party, much to Jane's surprise. Katy, at the tender age of fifty-two, is the victim of an *affaire du cœur,* which makes her nervous and the coffee very bad. Adam, you know, is a Scientist, and never

verbally considers a material condition. And I, as you may surmise, am hardly expected to live," and he drew himself up to his full stature, expanding a generous chest and a generous smile at the same time.

But his glance by chance falling on Grandfather Strong's clock, the smile grew less expansive, the visible march of time aggravating his impatience.

In blissful ignorance Mrs. Strong looked up at him.

"You are positively insulting with your robustness," she declared with a frown. "I don't understand, any way, why such a big share of the ills of the flesh fall to women."

"Nor I, unless Eve was made out of the worst rib Adam had."

This was an inspiration, born of despair, and Robert Belden hoped it would preclude further argument, but his hopes were vain.

"That's logical," he heard his sociable companion say; then, spying some shreds of tobacco on the floor between them, she be-

gan to sweep in a dilatory fashion as she talked.

"It accounts, too, for any little moral weakness Eve may——"

"Louise," he interrupted, "Louise, please don't—don't clean in here just now. Please fix some other room. I have only a little time, and—don't you know? I want to see Miss—I want to see Barbara alone. Won't you go and send her to me?"

She looked up at him blankly. The dust cloth fell unheeded to the floor, and the handle of the noisy sweeper dropped softly against the seat of a cushioned chair. Then the light of reason slowly dawned. Her lips framed a faint but compendious "Oh!" and she fled from the room.

Just a moment, and he heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and the faintly perceptible rustle of a gown nearing the door.

Turning from the window through which he had been gazing at the white beauty of the world outside, Robert Belden waited,

his whole being keyed up to the highest pitch.

Something of all he felt and hoped must have emanated from his person, for Barbara McClellan advanced but a little way into the room, after a cordial "Good-morning," until, held by the brightness in his countenance, she stopped and faltered, "Why, what is it? You——"

He had not moved since she entered the door till now, as if in response to her appeal, he came slowly forward, taking the hand she offered, and the other one, too.

"I came to tell you that I love you, Barbara."

The eyes that had so earnestly questioned fell before his ardent gaze.

He bent his head until he felt the softness of her hair against his face.

"And I want you to marry me to-morrow, will you, dear?"

She looked up startled, perplexity and, he thought, a shade of reproach in her eyes.

She half withdrew her hands, but they lingered, trembling, and finally lay quite passive in his masterful, tenacious clasp.

"Marry you to-morrow? Why, I can't understand," she murmured brokenly, a wave of crimson surging over face, and neck, and ears.

"No—no—how could you?" he said, as one might speak to a troubled child. "But come over here a moment in the sunshine, and let me talk to you a little, Barbara. Let me tell you all about it."

He led her to the couch and, placing himself beside her, began to speak in low, convincing tones.

"First of all, I said I loved you. That's really the beginning and the end. You may have guessed a little, but you cannot know how much. Only since the evening we spent together alone here in front of the fire have I known myself, and oh, since then, the world has seemed newly made, and everything worth while. I resolved to woo you

very tenderly, very patiently, for weeks, months, years if need be; only I hoped and sometimes almost dared believe that some day soon your heart would respond a little to the love in mine."

He paused a moment and looked away.

"Then last night"—softly, half reverently he spoke, "a letter was given me to mail to Santa Claus. I read it, and since—oh! I have lived in the joy of an overwhelming conviction, and I know I am right, sweetheart. It is part of our lives for me to come to you to-day, and for you to say, 'I love you, Robert.'"

She stirred uneasily, and a tremulous sigh escaped her, as with a bewildered air she pushed back the hair from her face, her hands tarrying a moment on either cheek, before seeking the comfort of each other in her lap.

He leaned forward and slightly towards her.

"Perhaps you have not known it before,"

he urged persuasively, "but it is true. You cannot say you do not, Barbara. Oh, look at me and say you do."

A merciless silence reigned while he waited—waited expectantly, but she did not look up at him, and she did not speak; only the shadow of a smile crossed her face, as one hand crept, like a little hypnotized white mouse, into his.

"You blessed girl, you darling," he cried, rapturously, raising it to his lips. Then with adoring indulgence he smiled upon her. For it was so like Barbara, such a characteristic surrender; sufficient, though not entire, betokening vaguely unreckoned stores of precious treasures, still to be delivered in her own good time.

She stole a glance at him, which he caught and tried to hold.

"Can't you say it, dear?" he questioned. "I am waiting."

"Say what?" The words were barely audible.

"You know, your part," amused at the feigned ignorance. "No? Well, is there any really good reason why you should not *look* at me? You used to, occasionally."

"I know"—she began, smiling up at him. But she did not finish, though she did look at him as she had never looked before, and he knew it, and was man enough to thrill and tremble under her tenderly searching gaze. Please God, the fullness of his love might lessen the burden of his faults and incompleteness!

Slowly a confidence never to be expressed in words illumined her face, while her fingers strove for greater freedom in his clasp —the beautiful freedom of untried privileges and proprietary rights, a transcendent joy for him to give.

Presently, taking an envelope from his pocket, he put it in her hand. It had a crooked address, and broken, untidy seal, and Barbara looked at it in curious interest, while he arose and stood before her.

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"Will you read it?" he said, "and then," in a confident tone, "I am sure you will understand all the rest. You cannot help it, Barbara."

He walked slowly to the other side of the room and took a position in front of the fire, following blindly the instinct to efface himself as much as possible, that her broad, beautiful, generous nature might be wholly open to this last appeal.

Not a sound but the crackling of the fire upon the hearth broke the stillness of the room.

From outside came the jingle of passing sleigh-bells.

He listened intently. It seemed as though he waited a long time. Could she have stolen away? He turned noiselessly about. No, she was there, but quite oblivious of his presence.

She sat looking straight ahead of her, smiling faintly, unshed tears upon her

lashes, and the soul he had divined and worshiped in her eyes.

"Oh, you darling!" she exclaimed.

Robert Belden did not move, almost fearing to awaken her to a realization of this new world which she had entered so unconsciously in response to John's call; for he comprehended fully that John was all she saw, that she had not looked around and did not know that he was there.

Softly he spoke her name, and she turned a rapt face toward him.

"Barbara," once more he called, while struggling manfully to get his equilibrium. But the reaction from the preceding hours was strong upon him, and this new atmosphere, so rare and intoxicating, robbed him of all discretion.

He saw her rise, saw her coming towards him, obedient to his voice, and then, before he knew it, he had her in his arms, kissing passionately her brow and eyes, and then her lips.

"Oh-h-h-h!" she gasped, as with rebellious hands she freed herself. "I cannot, to-morrow—so soon. Really, I cannot."

Robert Belden walked the length of the room and back, to gain perfect mastery of himself and a fresh hold on the situation, and then, with new deference, stood before her.

"Yes—yes, you can," he asserted. "I will not again be guilty of appropriating John's Christmas Gift. I know—I had no right. It shall be to me a very sacred trust. I am happy—gloriously happy," beaming upon her, "and quite content to worship each day at whatever distance you may designate." The tone was serious despite the facetious words. "Forgive me, and believe me, Barbara."

She made no direct reply, but the storm of protest faded slowly from her face, leaving it serene and happily contemplative.

"Well, there's one thing," she began, seating herself and regarding him solemnly, "I must have time to look into your habits."

"My habits?" with amused surprise.

"Yes, your habits, and I have reason to believe they are very bad."

"I presume they are bad, some of them—most of them, in fact," he answered humbly. "But I'm sure you can reform me if you'll only try."

"I know, but it's a good deal to undertake," she continued. "When a man at the beginning of his career planted 'high-ball bushes' in his mother's back yard, it's a question if, at the age of forty, he isn't past reforming."

"So he told you that, did he?" laughingly pinching her cheek, "but I'm not forty, my dear," he objected, adopting another tone. "You can't play 'summer in the lap of winter' with me. I'm willing to be your early autumn or Indian summer, but

that's the limit of my indulgence in this particular line. And it ought to satisfy any reasonable woman."

"Yes, but where do you suppose he ever heard the word?" she persisted.

"Probably from Jane. But, by the way, in regard to habits, I have a word to say myself. There is no doubt in his letter John alludes to you, but this climbing business I don't quite grasp. Now, was it at the party he witnessed this—accomplishment of yours?"

"How absurd!" she said, smilingly defiant.

"Now, of course, my dear girl," he continued, "I want to be lenient, and so I shall not object to your climbing in the country or unfrequented parts of the park, but really, I can't have my wife doing acrobatic feats in the drawing-room."

"Well, I shall never obey—never—about anything," she warned him. "Besides," more seriously, "it isn't at all settled that

you're going to have a—a—at least me," she finished lamely.

"Barbara! you're not going to be an Indian giver?"

"No, but I haven't asked Louise and Henry yet, and I'm ashamed to tell them. It's—so disgracefully sudden."

"Never mind, dear, I will, as I go out. I am not one bit ashamed. Besides, they have every reason to be thankful. It might be worse, you know. Everything is thoroughly respectable, and—well, we might elope."

"Really! Indeed!" with spirit and heightened color. "You seem very sure of yourself, Dr. Belden."

"No, not at all. Not of myself, ever, with you. But I am of John. For you know, Barbara," taking her chin in his hand and raising her face to a more satisfactory angle, "you know you would run away with John Belden at a moment's notice. Now, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, with John," she admitted.

"But not John's father?"

"Not John's father," she repeated, changing the inflection.

"Which means," with an air of dejection, "you do not love him—at least, as much as John."

Barbara eyed him with suspicion.

"I think—you're putting on," she said.

"You don't deny it."

"Oh, yes—yes, I do. Only—Don't you see? It's so different. I have always loved babies and children, even when I was nothing but a child myself. Why, I used to borrow all the neighbors' and pretend that they were mine. While with husbands, why, you know—you can't——"

"No, not exactly," he agreed, with a smile. "But to be serious, I do see, dear, and understand perfectly, that, after the advantages of dolls and borrowed offspring, you are quite ready for John, and that it

has not been possible, of course, to make similar preparation for me."

She laughed happily at his manner of stating it.

"But I have neglected some splendid opportunities," she admitted, shaking her head regretfully. "Month after month I scorned all the women's magazines had to offer on Husbands; how to pick one, how to train and manage one, even how to hold one."

"H'm'm! It sounds like the study of a real beast, doesn't it?" he commented grimly.

"Then," she continued, "there are suggestions for the intelligent diversion of the——"

"Beast?" he questioned.

"Yes, and recipes for dishes calculated to keep the——"

"Beast," he suggested again.

She nodded her head. "Mild and tractable. So you see," she continued, "I will just have to cram between now and——"

"No, I don't see at all," he interrupted her. "The other Beauty didn't, and her beast came out beautifully; and I'm bound to evolute in time, dear. Don't be disheartened. But I'll have to go," turning to look at the clock. "I have a poor devil waiting for me at the hospital, and I'm almost due. I shall come in for a little while to-night, if I may, and if you should want me for any reason before, why, I am at your service —just as I've always been. Good-bye."

He leaned over, and taking her hands, drew her to her feet. "There isn't any one in all the world so sweet as you, or half as good," he said.

Chapter
Four

Chapter Four

BARBARA stood quite still where Robert left her, as in a dream, which slowly faded with his receding footsteps.

She heard him as he bounded eagerly up the stairs; heard his firm, reliant tread in the direction of Henry Strong's study, and finally the closing of the study door.

That ended her somnambulent condition, and starting, in sudden realization of mundane limitations, she wished that she were with him; waiting was so hard, and every insignificant sound startled her.

She wandered aimlessly about the room. What were they doing, she wondered, and what was Robert saying? What was he telling—how could he tell this wonderful thing which she, as yet, hardly dared whisper to herself—that he loved her—Barbara—and that she loved him—oh, so dearly! She

passed the back of a pink-palmed hand across her eyes, to shield them from the blinding glory of the thought.

But the rest, would it seem lightly reckoned to grave Henry Strong that already, so quickly, the time was set? It was incredible! The wild beating of her heart increased every second, while she longed, yet dreaded to hear the study door open.

Seating herself, she spread with trembling hands her handkerchief upon her lap, and pulled out the rumpled corners with scrupulous care. Its perfect smoothness accomplished, she folded the square of linen diagonally across, doubled over opposing ends, continued a rolling manipulation with her deft fingers, until there emerged, as from the hands of a real magician, a pseudo-mouse of nursery origin.

She paused a moment to listen, and then abstractedly applied a few finishing touches to the head and tail,—presumably such,

since they were at opposing ends, though identical in contour.

Then, at last! She sprang to her feet, the newly-created mouse clutched savagely in one tense hand. An expectant light came into her wide-open eyes, for voices sounded in the hall above, then lightly falling footsteps, a cry of "Barbara, Barbara, I'm so glad," and she was in Louise's arms.

"And I am so happy," she said, her head on the coveted shoulder.

"So is Robert, dear."

"And so ashamed."

"Robert isn't. He's positively brazen with joy and triumph. And pray, what are you ashamed of, you old sweet thing?" giving her a squeeze for emphasis.

"Of to-morrow!" and Barbara, drawing herself up, looked appealingly at her friend. "Does it seem frivolous, or thoughtless, or unwomanly so soon?" she questioned. "I couldn't help it, really," and she wiped away a happy tear with the inanimate mouse.

"But it does seem dreadful, Louise. Think of being engaged one day and married the next! Oh," she cried, a sudden wave of realization troubling her, "do you realize it's to-morrow? *To-morrow!* And here it is to-day already!"

She rose as if about to run away, then turning, looked foolishly down into her companion's face. "I wonder," she said musingly, "if I'm getting 'luny,' as Maria says. So much has happened——"

"I'm inclined to believe you are," replied Louise, her eyes bent upon the floor, an inscrutable expression on her face.

Barbara's eyes sought the same point of interest, and fell upon the forlorn, bedraggled mouse that lay between them. She stooped to get it, but Louise was before her, and taking it gingerly between forefinger and thumb, held it up for inspection.

"It's a beauty of its kind," she commented, "but if on the very brink of matrimony it's indicative of your mental state, I

really think you are 'luny,'" and she smiled commiseratingly. "But Barbara," in a new tone, "there is one thing I should like to know, if it isn't presuming to ask. Why, since you seem so troubled by the alacrity with which things are moving along—*why* are you letting them move?"

"Oh, don't you know? Didn't he tell you?"

"No, he didn't. At least, I didn't wait to hear. It was all such a relief, after my hour of suspense," and Louise Strong heaved an exaggerated sigh.

"Suspense?" said Barbara.

"Yes, suspense, my dear. Of course, you don't know, but this morning Robert Belden boldly asked me to vacate my own library, and send you to him. He didn't say why," shaking her head expressively, "but from the look in his eye and the queer little catch in his voice—don't you just love his voice, Barbara?—I knew something was about to happen."

Barbara said nothing, only smiled encouragement.

"Well," Louise went on, "after you went downstairs, I couldn't stand to be alone, so I just went straight to Henry Strong's study and climbed into his lap, right in the middle of his sermon on 'The Eternal Fitness of Things,' and held my breath, and pinched the pious rector of St. Mark's Church, and prayed a little for us all, and dear old Bob in particular. And I felt all the time as though I were going to explode, and"—stopping for breath—"Henry was dying of curiosity, of course, like all men, and I was going to tell him, and then I couldn't till I knew; so I just said, 'Henry Strong, don't ask questions or talk, or do anything but wish that what I'm wishing will come true.' And then I took the pencil away, closed his books and got just as close to him as I could get, and he had to give up 'The Eternal Fitness of Things' and devote himself to the awful *un*fitness of me."

Barbara, laughing, drew closer. She wanted to know the rest.

"And oh!" Louise exclaimed, "when I heard Robert's step in the hall I almost ran to the door, and when—I—saw him—well, I'm not perfectly sure," in a subdued tone, "you'll have to ask him, Barbara, but I think I hugged him, and I don't know for how long."

"Oh-h-h," said Barbara, flushing at the mere thought.

"Then I heard him say, 'People, she has said yes,' and something about its being to-morrow, and then I ran away to you. So that is all I know."

"Then read this, dear," and Barbara gave her John's letter. "It's my only vindication for the to-morrow part."

Louise glanced over it. "Vindication!" she cried. "You don't need a vindication. And bless his lonely little heart! Whoever would have guessed it! But out of the clouds, dear," she cried, jumping up.

"Give up dreaming and the making of mice for a while and think about the real necessities of life, wedding gowns and things."

"I know I must. There isn't time to get a real wedding dress, but I believe," thoughtfully, "I have something that will do very well. It's white, of the finest batiste, Louise, and trimmed in a lot of real Val. It's very pretty, really. I got it just before" —she stopped in sudden recollection—"and only wore it once," she went on softly, "and father admired it so—liked it better than anything I had, and somehow, since, I have never had the heart to put it on. But now——"

"Now it's different," ended Louise cheerily, but she laid a hand tenderly on Barbara's.

"Yes, and I'll get the dress out for you to see," Barbara went on, bravely smiling through her tears.

"And I'll go and interview my 'black

Maria ' in the kitchen, and then I'll come upstairs and we'll talk it all over and decide on everything, and after that you needn't expect to see anything more of me this morning. Why, here's Henry," she announced, as her husband appeared on the scene.

Henry Strong's expression alone would have been quite enough to assure Barbara of his entire approval, and the warm clasp of his hand and words of congratulation were all that was needed to fill her cup to overflowing.

" I'll have to congratulate you, my girl, even if it is bad form," he said, " for I know the man."

" You're awfully good to me, and I don't know what to say in defence of forcing a wedding on the family," she said, looking from one to the other. " But it's partly Robert's fault and partly John's—only a third mine. And I do hope," she continued, " you won't burden yourselves with the arrangements. Let it all be simple and natural—

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just ourselves and the children. Really, I'd much rather have it so. Anyway," turning to Louise, "you know how prone you are to headaches——" She got no further.

"Aha! I recognize my opportunity, vile oppressor!" cried Louise in tragic tones. "You remember," facing Barbara in fiendish glee, "Jo's party?—and me?—in bed? Well, I'm master of ceremonies this time, and except for preferences meekly expressed, I shall brook no interference from you, my lovely bride to be! And now, farewell. You people can dwell on the spiritual and romantic side of things all day, but I must attend to beautifying the surroundings of the bride and the satisfying of the inner groom, to say nothing of the officiating clergy," and she gently tweaked the nose of her admiring spouse and swept out of the room.

But the rector soon returned to his unfinished discourse, and Barbara, after a brief conference with Louise, was left to her

own devices, which were of an exceedingly shadowy and inconsequent character.

She never had a very distinct recollection of that morning, except the element of joy that pervaded everything, even the very air she breathed.

She faithfully essayed occupation but accomplished little, for a deep, melodious voice of which she never lost entire consciousness, interposed persistently, again and again, in words that sent her wits a-wool-gathering and drove her, in a state of blissful consternation, to the reassuring perusal of John's letter, which somehow seemed to hold the balance of the world.

But finally, little by little, out of chaos, a memorandum for the prospective afternoon's shopping was evolved, in obedience to Louise's parting injunction. It was not remarkably explicit or lucid, even to Barbara herself, and she quailed at the thought of Louise's bantering scorn.

However, judging from the glowing, contented faces presented at the Strong dinner table that evening, and the tales of endless purchases with which the man of the house was regaled: tales continually confirmed by the delivery of packages large, small, and medium, at the front, side, and rear doors, certainly the expedition had proven a success, and exhilaration reaching the point of irresponsibility possessed the shoppers. They fairly gloried in exhausted bank accounts, insisting that not a sou remained, that even the copper funds hoarded by the minister's household for the clothing and education of African heathen had been confiscated.

After dinner Barbara repaired to her room to rest; at least, that is what she said and meant to do. What she really needed was to be alone, to find herself. As the hour of Robert's coming drew near, she was controlled, first, by a wild desire to see him, and then by an equally wild desire to run

away. For with physical exhaustion and the night had come some doubts and perturbation.

At present the future lay before her like a strange land to whose very gates she had been swept unwittingly. And now her girlhood pleaded for a moment's respite in which to live over a happy past, enjoy life as it was for a while, and steal, perchance, a tiny glimpse into the future.

Oh, if it were only next week, instead of to-morrow, this future! The present was so perfect, and she could change it all and be a New Year's present just as well. She could write John herself, explaining how it was, that she was late in getting in—from Mars. And all the time she knew she wouldn't—that she couldn't. That he who had brought her to the gate would carry her beyond. She could feel the firm clasp of his hand and his compelling eyes, and she was—be truthful, Barbara! yes, glad to go.

Nevertheless, she whimsically arraigned

him before her woman's bar of justice, the charge, "unlawful coercion."

He had been merciless, had taken every advantage of her weakness, but her mental picture of him somehow quashed the accusation. "No, he was not splendidly handsome enough to be a real villain," she reflected with smiling tenderness. "Neither was his coloring sufficiently intense."

Putting out the light, Barbara drew aside the curtains, leaning her elbows on the sill and her face in her hands.

That nothing stood for long in Robert Belden's way was true, not because he domineered, but that he dominated. Intensely human, life in all its phases touched him, but his very bearing spoke control and well-directed manhood, and one always felt his personality was plus their realization of it; that there was more strength, more fire, more tenderness than they could see.

And so, with the influence of his personality strong upon her, there grew in Barbara

a firm reliance in his power to recognize and banish all forms of doubt and fear, even the husband himself if need be; and after watching his approach to the house, she did not even wait to be summoned, but descended the stairs with glad anticipation and noiselessly entered the room.

He was standing with his back to the door and did not hear or see her.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come," she said, laying a hand ever so lightly upon his arm. It was promptly covered with one of his. He turned and looked at her.

"Why, you've grown more beautiful since morning, Barbara," he said with wonderment.

"No, only happier," discreetly withdrawing her hand.

"I like to hold it,—it's—no trouble," he assured her with a whimsical smile.

"No, but—won't you have a chair?" she questioned, taking one herself.

"Instead? Thanks, awfully," amused at

the unusual formality. "But, Barbara, what's the matter with the room?" looking about with curiosity at the pile of curtains on the couch, an occasional rolled up rug, misplaced furniture, and a general air of confusion and preparation. "It looks as if it were on the brink of a revolution."

"I guess it is. Some one's going to be married in here to-morrow."

"Really? How interesting! And what's that over there?"

"Where?" looking around.

"There," indicating a large expanse, quite devoid of furniture.

"Oh, that? The place of execution, probably."

"H'm'm! It must be a large and portly victim, or else they are very prodigal of space," he remarked dryly.

"But there are two," explained Barbara.

"Two? What a shame! And both young and handsome, I presume. Grue-

some, isn't it?" he said, assuming his favorite position before the fire.

"Dreadfully gruesome. Would you rather go to the drawing-room?" she enquired, knowing well what the answer would be.

"Horrors! No."

She laughed softly at him, and then turning her gaze again on the fateful spot, became suddenly grave and silent. Robert grew restless. An air of remoteness about her troubled him.

Closely he scrutinized her face. Just the profile was visible, but it was very sweet and womanly, and child-like too, he thought, and it came to him the first time that day what to-morrow meant to Barbara. It meant a great deal to him, a man. Notwithstanding his happiness, the day had not passed without serious thought. It meant a great deal more to her, a woman.

Impulsively he poked the smouldering logs on the andirons, an involuntary expres-

sion of a thought to cheer. With quick flame and lively crackle the fire brightened the prospect, making even obscure things softly roseate and giving Robert courage to enquire:

"You're not frightened, Barbara, or sorry it's—to-morrow?"

"No," turning slowly toward him. "No, not when I'm *with* you," she said.

"And when you are not?"

"A little."

"And that's why," exultantly advancing upon her, "you were glad when I came to-night?"

"I guess so," looking up at him foolishly, "for this afternoon you seemed quite —formidable, and now you are here, you are just plain Robert Belden, M.D., and I'm not afraid a bit."

To prove it she leaned a bit toward him, lightly brushing her cheek against his coat sleeve.

"Barbara! you child!"

He wanted, oh, all sorts of things for an instant, and then contented himself, having learned that what she freely gave was sweeter far than what he took, and unfailingly heralded a greater blessing.

After a moment's happy silence, he drew up a chair. "Tell me," he said, "what you have been doing all day."

"Well," she began, "I met Louise at Clancy's about one, where we had lunch, and then she piloted me around, and oh, the things we bought!——" getting ready to enumerate them on her fingers. "Trains of cars, silk dresses for cooks, firemen's suits, marbles, negligees, a coat, toy automobiles, a drum, Christmas tree decorations, two dolls, gloves, two watches, ten books——"

"Oh, stop, have pity," he cried, imprisoning her hands. "My head is spinning and you put me to shame. I was on the rampage three whole hours myself, and

this "—laying a small white box in her lap, "is all I managed to bring home."

Barbara opened it and exclaimed with delight as she viewed the contents admiringly from all angles and in all lights. Then, in a practically interested tone, and with an inquiring upward glance, "For Jane, or the cook?" she said.

"Neither. The new housekeeper."

"Oh!" striving to be unconcerned.

"Do you think she'll like it?" anxiously.

"She'll love it, I'm sure, only——" stealing another look at him, "aren't you afraid you're spoiling her?"

"Not a bit."

"With such a beginning! why, she'll be expecting diamond tiaras and ruby stomachers at the end of six months."

"Gracious! You don't mean it!" and Robert Belden wrinkled his brow with well assumed anxiety. "Well," slipping the ring on her finger with sudden resolution, "it will have to be thoroughly understood,

then, that this is simply a retaining fee, to preclude all other possible engagements, and not a forerunner of emblazoned breastplates and headgear. But I'm so glad it fits, dear, and that you like it," he added softly, "and I hope it heralds only the best for you, my girl."

"It does, I know. It heralds you."

"That's very sweet, and I shall try to prove it true. But about the arrangements for this—'execution' I believe you called it? You haven't told me a thing, and I'm really interested."

"At six, in here, just the family—and your brother, is he coming?"

"Yes. The only member of the family available on such short notice. But I talked over the long distance with Sue today."

"Oh, what did she say? Was she shocked?"

"Not a bit of it, only, of course, it was a trifle startling. But after she got through

gasping and saying 'Robert! Really, you don't mean it!' and so on, she sent all kinds of loving messages to you, seeming to forget that I existed. Then she wanted to gossip as to when and where it happened, the exact color of your hair and eyes, how old you are—really impudent questions, Barbara. I had to call a halt."

They laughed merrily. "I think you'll have a line from her to-morrow," he added.

Then they talked of John, and Jane, and of what John's life had been, and what it was to be, even to his senior year at college.

And Barbara imparted her plans for their first Christmas day and the dénouement in the morning, and in response to eager inquiries, Robert told her of John's hopes and fears, as indicated by conversation with himself and Jane.

"Strange," he said, "that while the little shaver seems to have it so constantly in mind,

and alludes to it frequently, he has never consciously betrayed himself. He goes just so far, and no farther."

"Do you really believe he expects me?" Barbara asked.

"Perhaps not you. No, I don't believe he does. For I think he feels somehow that mothers are matters of direct inheritance, and scarcely available in this world. That's why he's banking on another planet."

"Bless him! Isn't he funny—but pathetic, too," she said.

"Yes, he has literally 'hitched his wagon to a star.' He not only believes, but his faith absorbs him—all but his appetite. He still eats, I'm glad to say."

"I can hardly wait for Christmas to come," and Barbara glowed with enthusiasm.

"Neither can I; only, of course," with a resigned air, "I don't expect to figure much. But," rising, "you are tired and sleepy. Oh, yes you are," he insisted when she shook

her head, "and I'm not going to keep you up another minute. Just think, Barbara," his voice growing low and tender, "I'm saying good-bye, and I shall not come again, unless I'm needed, till I come to take you home. Home, dear, our home, and John's. I cannot tell you what it means—what it *will* mean to have you always there."

He smiled in seeming indecision, then took a position behind her, resting his arms on the back of her chair.

"Shall I tell you what I did to-night?" he asked. "I forgot when I said I brought only the ring home, for on the way from the jeweler's I saw—some sort of—work-box. That's what made me late for dinner. It took so long to find just the right one, and get it properly equipped. Guess I was hard to suit," he admitted, laughing, and he stopped to push in place a loosened hair-pin and admire the shining braids that crowned her head.

"And what did you do?" Barbara questioned.

"Well, after dinner, in the living room, where I always sit, I drew into place opposite, but not very far from mine, a low, easy chair—the one you always use when you come to see me in my dreams, and I put a little stool before it for your feet. On the table you will find your friends Tom Moore, 'The Brushwood Boy,' and Barrie's 'Little White Bird,' and beside them a dish of violets that I fixed myself. Then, on the other side of the table, near the lamp, is the sewing-box, Barbara, and—guess what is inside."

"Scissors."

"Little ones, with gold handles."

"And thread."

"Yes."

"And needles."

"Enough to last a lifetime, I should think. But try again."

"Why, I can't think. Oh, yes, how stupid! A thimble, of course."

"Yes, and other things, including an appetizing red silk radish, a new Burbank variety, I presume, for polishing needles. But none of these are the things I mean, dear. Guess again."

"Why, I can't imagine, really," she said, puckering her brow.

He leaned over her. "My gloves," he whispered, "that need mending, and have a button off. You—don't mind?" a bit abashed at his presumption. "There's a box of Alegrettis in the table drawer," he added lightly, with a boyish idea of redeeming himself.

She put one slim hand over her shoulder to get him, and he found her eyes full of tears when he faced her, and one big, overgrown, unmanageable one had fallen out upon her cheek.

"Why, what's the matter, *mein liebchen?* You don't *have* to——"

"Oh, it isn't that," she cried. "You know it isn't. But I am—you are——"

"The luckiest man on earth," he finished, her flushed face between his palms. "I know it without being told, dear heart."

They went up the stairs together. At the top Mrs. Strong took Barbara in charge, and Robert sought the Rector for a half hour's quiet talk and a good cigar.

Chapter
Five

Chapter Five

THE following evening, at the same time that John Belden, with Adam and Jane in attendance, was partaking of his evening meal, in blissful ignorance of the pregnancy of the hour, the idol of his dreams stood the center of an admiring group.

Mrs. Strong, putting a few finishing touches here and there, viewed her with critical satisfaction, and Elizabeth and Jo, who had been admitted to witness the completion of the bridal array, with feelings of awe and childish delight, while Margaret, whose admiration completely absorbed her German mentality, sat mechanically by, holding as in a vise the ten-months-old Henry Strong, Jr. He divided his attention between vicious attacks on a rubber rooster and soulful appeals to Barbara to take him.

Why she didn't he couldn't in the least understand, and after each futile appeal, dashed the rooster vindictively to the floor and scolded lustily until Margaret was sufficiently aroused to restore it to his capricious hands.

"No, you are not going to your Auntie Barbara to-night, young man," his mother said, as he made another demand for Barbara's attention. "Lay him down on the couch, nurse, and get his bottle so that he may have it promptly at six. Now I must go downstairs. I think I heard the front door close. Which probably means the groom, and he may need me to lean upon, who knows? He's such a timid lad."

"And you'd be such a healthy prop."

"Don't be too scornful. You may have need of me yourself before the evening's over," warned Mrs. Strong, starting on a final tour of inspection. "Well, you're perfect, absolutely, dress and all," she announced, rounding up in front of the bride,

"and you look like an angel—or madonna, or something, I don't know what. Now kiss me, and obey instructions. This mav be a small affair, but it has to go off with some degree of system and éclat. Now don't forget," admonishing with her forefinger, "that as soon as you hear the first notes—I mean——" correcting herself hastily, "I mean as soon as the clock strikes, you are to come."

"Why can't I go down now, with you? I'm ready."

"Why, Barbara, my dear, I wouldn't think of allowing it. Who ever heard of a decorous bride presenting herself at the altar ahead of time?" and Mrs. Strong tried to frown. "I'm shocked. You, of all people! Besides, I want a moment to look over the groom, in the absence of the female members of his family, and see that the flowers and candles are in working order. Come, children."

"Oh, please let them wait and come with

me. Almost all brides have some attendants," argued this one.

"Well," pausing to consider, "I don't mind, if you'll promise to keep them at arm's length. But remember, both of you," turning to the young hopefuls, "don't you dare to touch your Aunt Barbara, and walk downstairs ahead of her, so you will not step on her dress," and gathering up the trailing folds of her own blue gown, Mrs. Strong proceeded downstairs.

"April fool," she drawled in sing-song fashion, encountering the impatient groom's expectant eye and advancing form as she entered the library. Then she sailed airily by to greet his brother, their only guest. "I'm so glad you're here," she said.

"So am I," George Belden responded. "But it was such a surprise I hardly got my breath in time to come."

"Or I, in time to have you. I tell you, these are strenuous times we are living in."

"And whoever would have thought it of Bob, the deliberate?" suggested Bob's brother.

"Or Barbara, the reserved, for that matter," supplemented Mrs. Strong. "But one never can tell."

"No, not when Fate and Santa Claus both take a hand," said the gentleman in question. "But will you kindly tell me, Mrs. Strong, where one Barbara is?"

"Upstairs, I think," she said, matter-of-factly. "And how are you this evening?"

"Not at all. Grooms never are, you know. But when is she coming down?" he persisted.

"The ceremony is at six, I believe," she responded, with studied indifference, by a look referring the matter to her husband. Then she left them to adjust a vase of lilies and hide a smile.

"Well, there's scarcely a minute more," Robert contended, trailing after her, watch in hand. "And you needn't laugh," he

added, encountering the trio of amused glances, " for I think on the whole I'm doing very well."

" You're all right, Bobby Belden," and Mrs. Strong patted his arm sympathetically, " but you *are* funny."

As she finished speaking, softly, from the church, through the medium of the Rector's study, there came to them, as from another world, the sweetly solemn strains of Wagner's Bridal Song from Lohengrin.

Very still they stood and listened, while the music grew in strength and volume, charged with unspeakable things.

Slowly, solemnly, one-two-three-four-five-six—the clock tolled the hour. Henry Strong took his place between the waiting lilies and the candles, and the bridegroom drew a little nearer to the door.

Soon, mingled with the organ's song, could be distinctly heard the high, sweet treble of children's voices in joyous exclamation, growing more subdued and hushed

as they approached. Then a sudden burst of uncurbed, gurgling mirth from an unexpected but unmistakable source fell upon the air, and as it faded away in expressions of cooing felicity, *her* voice in crooning admonition.

"Must be Auntie Barbara's good boy," it said, and then she smiled upon them from the doorway. In her arms, triumphant, a tear-stained, red-cheeked, wide-eyed, night-gowned cherub, one chubby arm about her neck, while from beneath the blanket that enfolded him, five pink toes squirmed in ecstacy.

His fond mother bore down upon them with consternation, transferring him instantly to the arms of the attending Margaret, who administered his evening meal without delay.

"Please let him stay," pleaded Barbara. "He cried to come with me, and I couldn't leave him crying," and she turned for Robert's justification.

"But your dress!" said Louise, in tones of distress, pulling out a bit of rumpled lace.

But Barbara didn't hear at all, for some one else was speaking.

"I am waiting. Are you ready?"

The music, and the voice, they seemed almost as one, and both enthralled her. In his outstretched hand she put her own. It trembled a little; still she smiled at him bravely as he led her to "the place of execution."

Once during the ceremony, just as Barbara was taking her vow of fealty, the voice of the youngest Strong was heard in spirited objection. It concerned the proper adjustment of his bottle, but fitly interpreted as an expression of sentiment, it did not lessen the impressive sweetness of the service, and at its close, the bride kissed the guest in arms first of all, after which, satiated with conquest and attention, and drowsy with warm

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milk, His Royal Highness was borne willingly to bed.

The hours following were never to be forgotten hours. In the absence of Dame Grundy and her set, the rarer spirits of love and perfect happiness stalked fearlessly abroad in laughter, tears unshed and honest congratulations; and more substantially evidenced in Maria's delectable wedding feast, supplemented later by a generous service of rice, old shoes and good wishes, a portion of which rested on the top of the carriage as Mr. and Mrs. Belden rode away.

After the closing of the carriage door, except for inquiries regarding her comfort, Robert left Barbara to herself. Passively she submitted to his solicitous care, dreamily content to watch the procession of street lamps, listen to the creaking wheels upon the snow, and as the carriages passed, wonder who the bride and groom were, and whither they were going.

But as the horses slackened their speed

to enter the drive, she leaned forward to peer through the half-frosted window.

"Where are we?" she questioned with diffidence.

"Just inside the gate, and if John only knew! There," directing her gaze, "the farther room at the corner is his, and the one with the light, immediately next, is yours. And here we are. Step with care," he cautioned playfully, helping her out. "This delivery of valuable Christmas presents is beginning to wear on my nerves," and he put an arm about her with a fine air of vigilance. "That will be all, James, good-night," he called over his shoulder, as they ascended the steps.

"Good-night, sor," came in half congealed Irish accents from the box.

Half consciously Barbara watched the carriage fade into the darkness, while Robert slipped the key into the latch.

"We'll not ring," he said, "because I want to open the door for you myself and—

lock you safely in," he added, smiling as he closed it, and adjusted the bolt and chain. "Now!" with a deep sigh of contentment.

She looked up at him quite at a loss, her pulses fluttering. What a tremendous word it seemed, and she had none commensurate to offer.

Impulsively she tendered him her muff. He took it, wondering a little.

"There isn't any place to keep it," she explained, looking helplessly about, as if expecting to find wardrobe facilities just inside the door.

"We'll find a place," he assured her, suppressing a smile. "But first won't you come in to the fire and take off your wraps?" and he ventured to push back the hood of her coat.

Barbara followed him dubiously, experimentally, as it were, in that highly wrought, sensitive frame of mind where in the falling of a leaf a die is cast. And the man who loved her, guessing as much, or nearly, de-

termined that her mood should guide him.

He took off his coat and laid it across a chair and put her muff on top. Then he brightened the fire and turned the burner in the lamp a little higher, moving easily and naturally, scarcely looking at Barbara, though conscious of every move she made, almost of her breathing, so keen his thought was of her.

At length she spoke. "Isn't it strange?"

"You mean the room?"

"No, that it isn't—strange, I mean. I thought perhaps it would be. But—I feel almost as though I had been here before," and she looked up at him for explanation.

"You have, many times. You may have forgotten," he conceded, as she demurred, "but I have seen you with my own eyes for as much as—a quarter of a minute! It was a joy to have you, dear, even for a little time, but such a disappointment when you went away. Oh! you *must* let me get that

coat off, Barbara," he exclaimed, starting impulsively toward her.

She gave him a look that made his fingers all thumbs, then heartlessly left him to struggle with the fastening of her wrap, while she revelled in new knowledge of his tastes and daily life, for everything in the room proclaimed him. Barbara began to understand why it was already home and not a strange abode, as her eyes wandered with tender interest over the carefully selected rugs, big, comfortable chairs and fascinating rows of books, to the big mahogany table with its splendid reading lamp and ready literature, and his beloved pipes. She loved each and every one herself. Then, casually appreciating the absence of pretty bric-à-brac, she enjoyed the restful diversion of a few choice pictures and the refreshing stimulus of a bronze Napoleon and a roaring lion that she longed to pat.

"No," she breathed, bringing her eyes back to his face, "it is so like you, so com-

fortable and homelike, that I want to stay."

"Even with no diamond tiaras and ruby stomachers in prospect?"

"Even so," she said, her gaze wandering to the dish of violets on the table.

He wondered, as, resting his hands for an instant upon her shoulders to stay his arms from quite encircling her, could she mean to be so temptingly sweet?

He took the coat and carried it to the farther side of the room and put it with his own; a simple act, affording him some degree of satisfaction and a moment's time to renew his resolutions.

Barbara walked over to the fire, observing as she did so a Flying Mercury upon the mantle shelf. Quite like an old friend, he seemed, and she smiled upon him with real affection. There had been one in her father's room at home. She laid one hand caressingly upon its base.

"Do you know, Robert," she began, and

then something, an indefinable agency, drew her attention upward, and her eyes encountered other eyes, claiming recognition gently, but irresistibly.

As though rebuked, she withdrew her hand and clasped it behind her with the other one and retreated a step, but her gaze never wavered, while intuitive knowledge of the pictured face oppressed her.

"Do I know what?" said Robert Belden, turning to retrace his steps. And then he grasped the situation.

Barbara did not answer. Revulsion, for the moment, made her dumb. Something tightened about her throat—even the right to breathe seemed suddenly denied her. "Why, oh why?" her heart cried, and "Why?" the girlish, wistful face above her questioned, too.

How like John's it was, she mused, and a wave of tender compassion surged within her, crowding out the thought of self, that, struggling, spent itself in the

swift movement of passionate appeal with which she sought her husband's arms. Clinging to him in tense silence for a time, at length, with hands slipping from his shoulders and eyes downcast, she murmured, "I think—I—am—ashamed."

He took the hands and kissed them fervently. "You needn't be, God bless you! But look at me, Barbara, look long, until you're—sure—forever."

She answered with a little wilful shake of the head, a tremulous smile about her lips. "Excuse me, but I shall not look—at all," she said. "What's the use?" And turning to her own easy chair, she sank into it with an exquisite air of abandon. "I think I'm ready for my mending now," she told him, and the eyes she raised to his were cloudless and wonderfully sweet.

"No, I can't have you sewing to-night," he remonstrated, happily, seeing she had come into her own again.

"But the gloves?"

"Hang the gloves! I need a little attention myself," and he established himself on the arm of her chair, ready to receive it. "Goodness, but you're sweet!" he added with a sigh, looking down at her. But not even this remark brought the slightest recognition of his presence. "Now what are you thinking about?" he questioned enviously. "Your friends, the Martians?"

"Not—exactly," she hesitated, smiling up at him. "I was only—wondering."

"I thought perhaps you were regretting—some handsome Lothario with landed interests in Mars. By the way, I hope you're prepared to give unlimited information, Mrs. Belden, regarding your former residence, for John's questions are——"

"Oh, but he'll recognize me, don't you think he will?" she interrupted, "and perhaps be disappointed."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, that I didn't come from Mars."

"He will never think of it. How could he, when he sees you? Besides, I am sure that Mars idea is cherished just to offset the contingency that a mother is not available here. Don't you see?"

"Perhaps so," meditatively. "But won't it be exciting?" she went on, her enthusiasm growing as she dwelt on their plans for the morning. "I don't believe I shall sleep a wink to-night."

"Oh, but you must. And I presume you'd better go up now. I'll ring for Jane." Returning to her side, he held out his hands. "Come, Barbara," he said.

She rose languidly, her eyelids drooping. "Oh, I was so cozy," she complained.

"I know," a brooding tenderness in the eyes he bent upon her. "No matter how sleepy children are, they never want to go to bed." Then, Jane answering his summons, was given Barbara's wraps and the new mistress entrusted to her care. "I know that you will see that she is com-

fortable," he concluded, as Jane moved away.

"Give any further instructions you may wish about to-morrow," he said, turning to Barbara. "And now, good-night, dear, happy dreams."

"Good-night," said Barbara, but she lingered till Jane turned to ascend the stairs, then quickly, as though fearing a host of witnesses might come, she raised her eyes to her husband's face. "I want to tell you," she said softly, little catches in her breathing, "how good you are—and how much I love you—almost as much—Oh-h! more than all the world, my dear!" She finished with his arms about her.

"I'm glad," was all Robert Belden could find voice to say. But in his eyes there was more than Barbara could fully comprehend of love and tenderness.

Mounting the stairs a half hour later, with his wife's carriage shoes tucked snugly under one arm, Robert Belden paused on

the landing, his attention arrested by a faint noise in the lighted hall above, and withdrawing into the deeper shadows of a corner, he saw emerge from the guest room next to John's, an angel!

He was sure it was an angel, for it had the light of Heaven in its face, despite the fact it carried a football and a gun and wore a flowing, diaphanous, lace-trimmed negligee.

With throbbing heart, he watched it move towards John's half-open door, and for a moment a wild desire possessed him to confine within his humanizing arms this bit of spiritual glory, football, gun and all; but distrust of what the penalty might be for molesting a celestial being held him back, until the vision disappeared, and then drove him in mad haste to the safety of his room.

Chapter
Six

Chapter Six

THE roseate rays of a but lately risen sun shone on a semi-conscious world, when in a corner room of a big house on G street there was a sudden upheaval of bedclothes, arms, head and tousled hair, and John Belden, in a final struggle with Morpheus, landed on his feet beside the bed. Then, rubbing his sleepy eyes, he tried to think who or what it was at the door of his consciousness so persistently proclaimed its arrival. For the shadows of Morpheus' retreating form obscured the face, and his sleep-sodden mind could not recall the name; only its warmth, and cheer, and glory reached him, as it clamored for admission.

"Come, John, wake up, wake up," it called.

The importuned one, in blue and white pajamas, sat on the edge of the bed, looking

stupidly before him, his eyes fixed on a well-filled stocking suspended in mid-air. And that gradually became the shining nucleus round which the warmth and joy and cheer took definite form and spelled him "Christmas." That was it, it was Christmas day!

A radiant welcome shone in John's face, but the recognition produced no impetuous hurrah, no customary war dance. A mystic hush subdued the commoner joys into a harmonious background for the awe-inspiring presence of the one, supreme: the mother that he longed for, wrote for, dreamed of, prayed for—she was first. And now his confidence in her nearness, real and tangible, intensified a hundredfold the previous superlatives of his childish thought, till maternal grace suffused the world.

Rising to his feet, with sanguine air John's eager eyes explored the utmost corners of the room. Twice they served him in a futile search, and then something

hurt him dreadfully inside, for he faced an aching void. She—was—not—there!

Like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky it came, striking John fair between the eyes. Half dazed, he took one despairing look under the bed, then crawled back in, and, condensing his misery into the smallest possible space, lay motionless, the covers drawn close about his head.

Just what transpired beneath them it is impossible to say, but Hope, ever alert, gathered her forces anew and presently lured him forth into the world again, where, supported by a feather pillow and her stalwart arms, he found just cause for laughing at himself.

"Of course, how silly he had been!" He almost laughed aloud. "To expect to find her just any where, sitting up, too, when she would be tired and sleepy, just like other folks. Of course she would." This point was most convincing. "Santa Claus had put her some place to rest. Why, any

one would," he argued impatiently. "He would himself, he knew, only, he couldn't quite make up his mind just where."

He thought of the comfortable couch in the library, and again of the empty beds upstairs. There was one in the room right next to his. John's heart gave a bound at the thought and all it might entail, and a sudden project moved him.

Full to bursting with hope and the excitement of immediate action, he gave the covers a mighty kick and once more scrambled out of bed. But this time he knew where he was, and why, and just what he meant to do.

Across the room hung a heavy curtain. It concealed a door, unused and always kept locked, but only yesterday, during a strenuous cleaning, it had been opened for a time, so the opportunity it afforded for secret investigation was fresh in John's mind. It led into a closet, which, in turn, opened into the adjoining room, thus making it

possible for John to investigate that, at least, without a chance of meeting any one who might ask questions, a thing he shrank from even at this decisive hour.

Hitching up his pajama trousers from the droop occasioned by the vigorous discharge of bedclothes, John walked quickly over to the curtain, pulled it aside, and carefully turned the key in the lock. He paused to look furtively behind him, and then, grasping the knob with both hands, slowly, cautiously, with abated breath, opened the door and crept into the closet.

About him all was dim and uncertain. He thought he smelled flowers, but he was not sure, and all that he could see were seeming shadows, that, soft and yielding to his touch, filled him with delicious though vague intimations of impending joy.

"Oh, if he should find her—if he should!"

With outstretched hands, John made his way to the farther door. He found it

slightly ajar, and promptly applying one well-squinted eye to the opening, descried a pile of white packages tied with scarlet ribbon, and the end of an open trunk. He gasped. It had never occurred to him that there would be one.

Trembling with excitement, he gently pushed against the door. Slowly it swung upon its hinges, gradually revealing a chair almost covered with a pile of indiscriminate fluffy whiteness, and then another, and on that reposed two white slippers and a pair of stockings, also white.

The slippers John indifferently associated with shoe-shop windows, but the stockings warmed his heart. They meant something. They really belonged to some one. They had been worn, he could plainly see by the suggestive fulness and the unmistakable imprint of garter clasps.

It all went through his head in a twinkling, and his mind, stimulated by the digested evidence of a trunk and contents of

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"'OH-H! YOU'RE MY—REALLY—MOTHER, AREN'T YOU?'"

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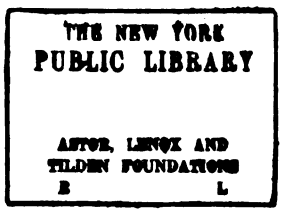
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two chairs, demanded something more. So he proceeded to once again enlarge his range of vision.

A prolonged and ominous squeak ensued.

John's eyes grew big with alarm. He caught his breath and held it. He also pressed his bare toes in stringent anxiety against the polished floor, while waiting for the walls to fall, or something equally inconvenient.

But nothing happened! The same deathlike stillness prevailed. The world slept on. And at length John risked a comfortable breath, and at intervals another, and another, until, a certain degree of poise restored, anxiety was lost in contemplation of a vase of flowers upon the dressing table.

The vase had been there yesterday, he knew, but the flowers, the little purple flowers—John's face grew luminous. As in a dream, he remembered seeing them before, only that was years, and years ago, and

many miles away, and now—to have them here?—Tears gathered in his eyes, for the light was dazzling.

He could not understand at all, only—some one must have brought them; some one must have put them in the vase; some one *had* undressed and gone to bed, of course, since there is no other place to go, divested of one's clothes.

And now Logic took a hand and led him without delay through the glittering maze of complex thought and feeling that engulfed him, past the outstanding door, to an unobstructed view of the mahogany four-poster.

One single glance sufficed, and John clapped both hands over his mouth to suppress a gigantic whoop, and a lot of smaller ones persisting in its wake, and which, denied escape, made him writhe in silent glee. For she had brought the flowers herself—from Jo's—and gone to sleep again, and right in the middle of a smile. But John

failed to notice she had forgotten to entirely close one eye.

In his consciousness surcharged with joy, there was no room for thought of how or why she came to be there. Neither was there solicitude for the mother he coveted. Why should there be, since somehow all the longing of his heart was satisfied.

Softly he approached the bed. Oh, he wanted to grab her; he fairly ached to; but it might not be exactly polite, so he only ventured to handle the lacy softness of her gown and touch with the tip of one finger the tiny band of shining gold upon her hand. And just at this most inopportune time, Nature, without warning, expostulated in a vigorous sneeze. It fairly cleaved the air. John dropped as though it had been a bullet and he the victim; and lying just as close to the floor as he could get, he heard the soft rustle of the bedclothes above him, and he knew the supreme moment had come.

Over the side of the bed slowly descended a heavy braid of bronze-brown hair. Then appeared a smiling face, surmounting a milk-white throat and breast, and a voice said,

"My *dear!* I'm afraid you're catching cold. Don't you want to get in bed with me?"

John wriggled to his knees, his lustrous, worshipping eyes fixed on the face.

"Oh-h! you're my — really — mother, aren't you?" he breathed ecstatically and with sublime assurance, for who else would tender such an invitation!

"I—belong to John Belden," she said, and held out to him her arms.

THE END